

A Critique of Shady Nasser's Treatment of the Ḥadīth of Seven Aḥruf

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The following is a brief critique of a section of Shady Hekmat Nasser's *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān* in which he discusses the origins of the ḥadīth of seven aḥruf. The ḥadīth, which was relayed in multiple wordings, establishes the notion that the Qur'ān was revealed in seven different modes. Even though the report has always been accepted by Islamic scholarship as not only authentic, but mass-transmitted as well, Nasser utilizes a hyper-skeptical method to claim that the promulgation of the ḥadīth only occurred at the hands of either 'Urwah bin al-Zubayr at the end of the first century or al-Zuhrī in the first half of the second.¹

The main focus of the critique will not be covering aspects related to the author's misrepresentation² of the opinions of classical scholarship; rather, the focus will solely be on his treatment of this ḥadīth, the issues in his methodology, and the bias that has clouded his judgment.

Three Theories on the Origins of the Report

1 – Second Century Sources

Nasser mentions sources like Muwaṭṭa' Mālik and Musnad al-Ṭayālīsī as the earliest extant sources that relay the report and correctly argues that the report's earlier origins can be traced through the convergence of chains of transmission. Nasser's goal is to "track down this ḥadīth, in its different versions, back to its principal *madār* (common link), i.e. the main person(s) responsible for circulating the ḥadīth."³ Nasser then provides alternative theories for the origins of the report.

¹ Shady Hekmat Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*, p. 31.

² Nasser, in an attempt to exaggerate the disunity of Islamic scholarship in determining what the seven modes are, says that "al-Suyūṭī enumerates thirty-five different interpretations." However, he neglects to mention what al-Suyūṭī quotes after providing the interpretations: "al-Mursī said: These interpretations mostly overlap with one another, I'm not aware what they are based on, nor of whom said them... and most of them conflict with the ḥadīth of 'Umar with Hishām bin Ḥakīm that is in the *ṣaḥīḥ*." See *al-Itqān*, p. 112. The quotation indicates that al-Suyūṭī considered most of these interpretations baseless and others as repetitive, but al-Suyūṭī's methodology in *al-Itqān* was to be highly comprehensive with the material that he gathered.

³ Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 8.

2- Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī and other Common Links

Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124 A.H.), one of the most prominent narrators of *ḥadīth*, was described by Nasser as “the common link for promulgating the tradition”.⁴ Nasser is only partially correct here. While al-Zuhrī is indeed the common link for the famous ‘Umar⁵ and Hishām narration, this is only one out of many reports on the topic. The report was deemed as *mutawātir*⁶ by many scholars, including a very early al-Qāsim bin Sallām (d. 224 A.H.).⁷ Refer to Figure 1 for a detailed, albeit not comprehensive, *isnād* tree that illustrates the strength and diversity of the paths of transmission.

In order for Nasser’s theory to hold merit, one would need to dismiss the reports of ‘Uthmān,⁸ Ibn Mas‘ūd,⁹ Abū Bakra,¹⁰ Ibn ‘Abbās,¹¹ Ḥuḍayfa,¹² Abū Hurayra,¹³ Abū Juhaym,¹⁴ Umm Ayyūb,¹⁵ Mu‘āḍ bin Jabal,¹⁶ and Ubayy bin Ka‘b¹⁷ as forgeries that came into existence after al-Zuhrī.

Nasser, in order to dismiss all of the corroborating narrations above and to push the report to a later date, employs methods ranging from selective *rijāl* criticism to a hyper-skeptical approach. His contrived conclusions were only arrived at after a rudimentary application of *ḥadīth* criticism.

⁴ Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 31.

⁵ Abdul Razzāq, *Al-Muṣannaḥ*, 11/99; Mālik, *al-Muwaṭṭa’*, p. 120; Al-Ṭayālīsī, *Musnad Abī Dāwūd al-Ṭayālīsī*, p. 14; Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 38, 190; Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, p. 895; Al-Rāzī, *Ma‘ānī al-Aḥruf al-Sab’a*, pp. 183-184.

⁶ The term translates to “mass transmitted” and is used to refer to narrations that are too well-attested to be considered fabrications.

⁷ Ibn Sallām, *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān*, p. 203.

⁸ Ibn Hajar, *Al-Maṭālib al-‘Āliya*, 8/121.

⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 1/53; Al-Ḥākim, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, 2/771; Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Al-Muṣannaḥ*, 6/138; Al-Ṭahāwī, *Tuḥfat al-Akhyār bi-Tartīb Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār*, 8/140; Ibn al-Bakhtarī, *Majmū‘ fīhī Muṣannaḥāt Abī Ja‘far Ibn al-Bakhtarī*, p. 413; Al-Mawṣilī, *Musnad Abī Ya‘lā*, p. 940; Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 318; Al-Dānī, *Al-Aḥruf al-Sab’a lil-Qur’ān*, p. 22.

¹⁰ Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 1455; Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 6/138.

¹¹ Abdul Razzāq, *Al-Muṣannaḥ*, 11/99; Ibn Sallām, *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān*, p. 203; Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 215; Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, p. 895; Ibn Hajar, *Al-Maṭālib al-‘Āliya*, 8/124.

¹² Al-Saffār, *Aḥādīth al-Shuyūkh al-Kibār*, p. 453; Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 1686, 1699; Ibn Sallām, *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān*, pp. 202-203.

¹³ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 6/138; Ibn Hibbān, *Al-Iḥsān fī Taqrīb Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Hibbān*, p. 309; Al-‘Askarī, *Musnad Abī Hurayra*, p. 48; Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 551, 1250; Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* 1/42; Al-Ṭahāwī, *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār*, 8/144-145.

¹⁴ Al-Madanī, *Hādīth ‘Alī bin Hajar al-Sa’dī ‘an Ismā‘īl bin Ja‘far al-Madanī*, pp. 378-379; Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 1225.

¹⁵ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 6/138; Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 2020.

¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu‘jam al-Kabīr*, 13/4676.

¹⁷ Al-Ṭayālīsī, *Musnad Abī Dāwūd al-Ṭayālīsī*, p. 94, 96; Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 1/39, 41, 42; Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 6/138; Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 1512, 1515; Ibn Sallām, *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān*, p. 201, 202; Al-Ṭahāwī, *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār*, 8/151-152; Ibn Tahmān, *Mashyakhat Ibn Tahmān*, pp. 172-173; Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 6/138; Al-Tirmidhī, *Al-Jāmi‘ al-Kabīr*, p. 873; Al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī al-Ṣuḡra*, pp. 131-132.

With regards to the narration of Ubayy, which has been narrated directly by several of his students, an obvious example of a common link, Nasser dismisses it by saying that “the study of the *isnāds* does not show a prominent common link responsible for promulgating this tradition, except for Ubayy himself, who, as a Companion, can hardly be considered a common link.”¹⁸ In other words, the common link is too early that Nasser feels a need to dismiss the attribution as a fabrication. Nasser is quite aware that if the report can be correctly attributed to a single companion then other paths to other companions gain legitimacy, and by extension, there would be no justifiable reason to deny the attribution of the report to the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Nasser offers little criticism of the chains of transmissions to Ubayy (Figure 2). In passing, he claims that ‘Āṣim bin Abī al-Najūd is “unanimously weak”¹⁹ and that Ḥumayd al-Ṭawīl is “not a strong transmitter.”²⁰ The reality is that both these statements are absolutely false, for both ‘Āṣim²¹ and Ḥumayd²² were considered reliable by scholars of *ḥadīth*, and it’s astonishing to see Nasser being so sloppy here by boldly asserting such factual errors.

Nasser also makes the mistake of critiquing narrators that are contemporaneous to al-Zuhrī. For example, Nasser correctly argues that Qatāda did not hear the *ḥadīth* of Ubayy.²³ However, since Qatāda, Ḥumayd, and ‘Āṣim are contemporaneous to al-Zuhrī, the theory that the report may have originated with al-Zuhrī becomes unsound. It should also be noted that the

¹⁸ Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 28.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

²¹ Nasser refers readers to “Ibn Hajar, *Tahqīb* 1/627.” The referenced page includes a biography of ‘Āṣim’s teacher Zir bin Ḥubaysh. There is nothing in the page about the unreliability of ‘Āṣim at all. ‘Āṣim’s biography can be found on 2/250-251 and includes praises by Al-‘Ijlī, Ibn Ma‘īn, Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, Abū Zur‘ah, and Al-Nasā‘ī. Abū Bakr al-Bazzār stated that he isn’t aware of anyone that dismissed his *ḥadīth*. The statements about his reliability outnumber and outweigh the criticisms. Nasser, in his recent publication, *The Second Canonization of the Qur‘ān*, p. 132, provides the correct page number, comes across the praise for ‘Āṣim, and avoids rectifying his blunder. For example, he says, “Ibn Sa’d said that he makes many mistakes in his *ḥadīth*,” while the original sentence is, “Ibn Sa’d said: **He is trustworthy**, but makes many mistakes in his *ḥadīth*.” The statement implies that ‘Āṣim had narrated so many reports that his many mistakes do not detract from his trustworthiness. Nasser’s incomplete quotation gives the false impression that Ibn Sa’d considered ‘Āṣim an unreliable narrator.

²² The chain criticized is through Ḥumayd from Anas from Ubayy. By returning to the source provided by Nasser, *Tahqīb al-Tahqīb* 1/493-494, we find him being referred to as trustworthy by Yaḥyā bin Ma‘īn, al-‘Ijlī, Abū Ḥātim, al-Nasā‘ī, Ibn Sa’d, and Ibn Ḥibbān. Nasser also accuses Ḥumayd of *tadlīs* (the act of attributing to one’s teacher what one didn’t hear directly) which doesn’t conflict with the fact that he is reliable. Ironically, the same reference he provides includes responses to the accusation. For example, Ḥammād bin Salama and Shu‘ba bin al-Ḥajjāj both state that the narrations of Ḥumayd from Anas are mostly *ḥadīths* that he heard from Thābit al-Bunānī. Al-‘Alā‘ī comments: “And upon the basis that the reports of Ḥumayd are *mudalassa*, the intermediate narrator has become known, and he is trustworthy and authentic.” In light of this information, we can come to the conclusion that Ḥumayd is a very reliable transmitter; however, he may have not heard this report directly from Anas. Instead, he more than likely heard it from Thābit, Anas’ primary student. On the off chance that he didn’t hear it from either Anas directly or through Thābit, but an unknown source instead who attributed it to Anas, we still have other authentic chains of transmission to Ubayy. Hence, it is perfectly reasonable to accept that Anas heard the report from Ubayy as well, and it is absolutely unreasonable to assume that someone fabricated the report of Anas and falsely claimed that he heard it from Ubayy.

²³ Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 20.

report was attributed to Ubayy by all three, which only strengthens the view that the report was promulgated by Ubayy.

It should also be noted that Nasser did not attempt to critique the reports going back to Ibn Abī Laylā, another one of Ubayy's students. Rather, Nasser identifies reports by Mujāhid and 'Abdullāh bin 'Īsā²⁴ from Ibn Abī Laylā, but overlooks the reports of his other students, like Zubayd²⁵ and Sayyār Abū al-Ḥakam.²⁶ Given that four narrators attributed this narration to Ibn Abī Laylā (d. 83 A.H.), it is more than sufficient for him to be regarded as a common link, who then would constitute an earlier common link than al-Zuhrī (d. 124 A.H.).

Another early common link can be found in the report of Ibn Mas'ūd through his student Abū al-Aḥwaṣ 'Awf bin Mālik (Figure 3). Three of Abū al-Aḥwaṣ' students narrated this report from him: al-Hajarī,²⁷ Abu Ishāq al-Sabī'ī,²⁸ and 'Abdullāh bin Abī al-Huḍayl.²⁹ Nasser didn't include the latter two in his research since he only limited himself to six sources,³⁰ which naturally led to incomplete results. Nasser only comments on the path of al-Hajarī,³¹ rejecting it due to al-Hajarī's weakness. This would have been a valid criticism if al-Hajarī was the only narrator from Abū al-Aḥwaṣ. However, two other students have attributed the same report to him. Abū al-Aḥwaṣ died around forty years³² before al-Zuhrī, which proves that the report was being circulated at least a generation earlier. Moreover, Abū al-Aḥwaṣ wasn't the only student of Ibn Mas'ūd to narrate this *ḥadīth*. Rather, other students like Fulfula al-Ju'fī and Abū Salama also narrated it from Ibn Mas'ūd. The reports can be found in *Musnad Aḥmad*³³ and *Mustadrak al-Ḥākim*,³⁴ two other important mainstream sources that Nasser didn't utilize.

The same can be said about Abū Salama (d. 94 A.H.) who narrates the *ḥadīth* of Abū Hurayra (Figure 4). Nasser weakens his report due to Muḥammad bin 'Amr bin 'Alqama.³⁵ However, two other narrators, Abū Ḥāzim and Abū Bakr bin Ḥazm, provide corroborations to the report.³⁶

To conclude this section, it is safe to say that al-Zuhrī was not the earliest common link; rather, there were others that predate him, like Ibn Abī Laylā, Abū al-Aḥwaṣ, and Abū Salama, as well as a close companion, Ubayy bin Ka'b. Most importantly, we have multiple strands all going back to the Prophet (peace be upon him), establishing that the report originated from him.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁵ Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 1515.

²⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 1/41.

²⁷ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 6/138.

²⁸ Ibn al-Bakhtarī, *Majmū' fihī Muṣannaḥāt Abī Ja'far Ibn al-Bakhtarī*, p. 413.

²⁹ Al-Mawṣilī, *Musnad Abī Ya'lā*, p. 940.

³⁰ Nasser, *Transmission*, pp. 18-19.

³¹ Ibid., p. 23.

³² Al-Bukhārī, *Al-Tārīkh al-Awsaṭ*, 1/348.

³³ Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 318.

³⁴ Al-Ḥākim, *al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, 2/771.

³⁵ Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 29.

³⁶ Aḥmad, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, p. 551, 1250.

3- ‘Urwah bin al-Zubayr

An alternative theory provided by Nasser identifies ‘Urwah bin al-Zubayr as the origin of the report. Nasser relies on a weak alternative wording³⁷ of the *ḥadīth* of ‘Umar and Hishām that mentions that Hishām’s variant occurred in the beginning of the chapter that he recited. Nasser then finds variants³⁸ in the beginning of Sūrat al-Furqān that were attributed to ‘Abdullāh bin al-Zubayr, ‘Urwah’s brother. Nasser concludes, “Thus, the tradition of the *sab‘at aḥruf* might have originated with ‘Urwah b. al-Zubayr as a result of the differences found between the ‘Uthmānic and the Zubayrī codices. This does not necessitate forgery on ‘Urwah’s behalf; rather, it indicates an interest on his part to propagate the *sab‘at aḥruf* tradition and perhaps to vindicate the codex and Reading of his older brother ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr.”³⁹

In order to establish the existence of ‘Abdullāh bin al-Zubayr’s *muṣḥaf*, Nasser directs readers to al-Sijistānī’s *Maṣāḥif*. Ironically, al-Sijistānī, a third century scholar, while listing other variants, does not ascribe these specific variants to ‘Abdullāh bin al-Zubayr. Nasser also references Abū Ḥayyān’s *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ* for the actual variants. However, seven hundred years separate Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745 A.H.) from ‘Abdullāh bin al-Zubayr (d. 73 A.H.), which makes this attribution doubtful.

Oddly enough, Nasser suddenly appears to be lenient and avoids adherence to his rigid ad hoc criteria for accepting reports when it becomes convenient to do so. Nasser, furthermore, overlooks the fact that the report does not include a chain of narrators or a common link. An attribution, with centuries of disconnection, suddenly becomes sufficient evidence for Nasser.

Nasser’s explanation, that the report “originated” with ‘Urwah, or that he was attempting to “vindicate the codex and Reading” of his brother, is unconvincing as well, since the variants that are attributed to ‘Abdullāh bin al-Zubayr are not included in the narration. Furthermore, the *ḥadīth* of seven modes doesn’t legitimize all possible variants, so ‘Urwah’s alleged goal would not have been met by merely propagating this *ḥadīth*. If that were ‘Urwah’s intention, then a simpler and more straightforward approach would have been sufficient. He could have either attributed ‘Abdullāh bin al-Zubayr’s alleged recitation to the Prophet (peace be upon him) or he could have critiqued other recitations as false.

³⁷ The wording is exclusive to Fulayh bin Sulaymān, who conflicts with all of al-Zuhri’s other students in this report. He is weakened by ‘Alī bin al-Maḍīnī, Yaḥyā bin Ma‘īn, Abū Ḥātim, Abū Dāwūd, and al-Nasā’ī. See Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahqīb al-Tahqīb*, 3/404.

³⁸ The first variant is the term *‘ibādihi* (slaves) instead of *‘abdihi* (slave) and the second is an addition of “*lil-jinni wal-insi*” (to the jinn and mankind). Both occur in the first verse of Sūrat al-Furqān.

³⁹ Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 30.

Furthermore, Nasser's claim that 'Urwah was responsible for "spreading the tradition" is groundless, since 'Urwah only narrates this report to al-Zuhrī. Either way, Nasser's theory that 'Urwah is the originator of the report is a hypothesis that is wanting and should be discredited given the absence of any strong supporting evidence.

Inconsistent Standards of *Ḥadīth* Authentication

Even though Shady Nasser's rejection of a *mutawātir* report and early common links comes off as hyper-skeptical, it should be made known that this isn't how he generally treats reports. The previous section on 'Abdullāh bin al-Zubayr's recitation indicates this. Another example can be found in his authentication of a report that was attributed to 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib:

"A well-known tradition often cited in classical sources tells the story of a man reading the Qur'ān before 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. The man reached (Q. 56:29) and read "*wa-ṭalḥin mandūd*" (and clustered plantains), but 'Alī objected and said: "what does this have to do with the *talḥ* (big thorny trees which camels usually feed on); it is rather *tal'* (clustered dates or pollen sacs) just like (Q. 50:10) "*lahā tal'un naḍīd*""'. The man asked 'Alī if he should correct this mistake in his own copy of the Qur'ān, but 'Alī objected and said that the Qur'ān should never be changed anymore. The tradition might be authentic to some degree, especially that both *shī'ī* and *sunnī* sources quote it."⁴⁰

Nasser uses this tradition to argue that a copyist error found its way into the Qur'ān and was adopted by the masses as an authentic recitation. He claims that traditions were forged and vocabulary entries were created in order to accommodate this error, a very bold claim to make.

Firstly, the report is not narrated in Shī'ī works as a Shī'ī *ḥadīth*. Al-Ṭabrisī, when quoting it in his *Majma' al-Bayān*, identifies it as a Sunnī narration.⁴¹ However, even if it were a Shī'ī report, it wouldn't make it any more authentic. Early Sunnī *ḥadīth* compilers were known for being comprehensive in their works and they would often quote forgeries,⁴² many of which were about the merits of 'Alī. Late Shī'ī scholars would naturally quote these reports, as they supported their ideological positions. Nasser is surely familiar with the concept of *sariqat al-ḥadīth*,⁴³ but doesn't seem to be open to the idea that this could occur across sects. This specific report doesn't even fall into that category, since the report is specifically identified as a report by *al-'āma* (a term used by Shī'īs to refer to Sunnīs) in the first place.

⁴⁰ Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 229.

⁴¹ Al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma' al-Bayān*, 9/330.

⁴² There are many reasons why Sunnī scholars quoted forgeries. Reasons include exposing those that fabricated them or to simply expose the forgery to those that weren't aware of it being one. Sometimes, the scholar is simply not concerned with selectiveness, and would quote narrations about specific topics without examining the chains. By providing the chain, society accepted that the scholar absolved himself any wrongdoing.

⁴³ *Sariqat al-ḥadīth* is the act of "stealing" a report's *matn* and creating a new chain for it. Refer to *al-Bayān wa-Ta'rīf bi-Sariqat al-Ḥadīth al-Nabawī al-Sharīf* for examples.

The report can be found in Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī⁴⁴ and Tafsīr al-Qurtubī.⁴⁵ The paths they provide go through Yahyā bin Saʿīd and ʿĪsā bin Yūnus, both from Mujālid,⁴⁶ from al-Ḥasan bin Saʿīd, from Qays (Figure 5). Not surprisingly, Mujālid bin Saʿīd was infamously unreliable and was weakened by Ibn Saʿīd, Abdul Raḥmān bin Maḥdī, Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, Yahyā bin Maʿīn, Abū Ḥātim, Ibn Ḥibbān, and al-Dāraquṭnī. Once, Yahyā bin Saʿīd asked one of his companions, “Where are you going?” He replied, “To Wahb bin Jarīr, to write the *sīrah* from his father from Mujālid.” Yahyā then said, “You’ll be writing a lot of lies.”⁴⁷

Based on a narrator like Mujālid, Nasser hastily declared all the reports that affirmed the ʿUthmānic *rasm* of this particular verse as “forged traditions”.⁴⁸ These include reports attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, Mujāhid, ʿAtāʾ, Qasāma bin Zuhayr, Qatāda, and Abdul Raḥmān bin Zayd.⁴⁹ If Nasser were consistent with his methodology, he would have dismissed this report for not having an early common link instead of relying on a report with a weak narrator that lacks corroborations.

Are Early Common Links Necessary?

As expressed previously in the section on al-Zuhrī above, the *ḥadīth* of the seven *aḥruf* was attributed to several companions, all of whom said that they heard the Prophet (peace be upon him) state that the Qurʾān was revealed in seven modes. The report is *mutawātir* from Ubayy and is authentically transmitted through several companions; however, most of these reports, like the narrations from Umm Ayyūb⁵⁰ and Abū Juhaym⁵¹ do not have early common links.

Some reports, though weak, should not be considered to be forgeries. An example of this is the narration of Umm Ayyūb. Nasser accuses her student, Abū Yazīd al-Makkī, of forging the report.⁵² While the biographical information that we have of Abū Yazīd is indeed scarce, which would result in him being classified as “anonymous”,⁵³ to claim that he fabricated this tradition is impetuous. After all, Abū Yazīd’s report is seen as a corroboration to what has been mass-transmitted from the Prophet (peace be upon him). Hence, the only plausible foul play that could

⁴⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 11/636.

⁴⁵ Al-Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām Al-Qurʾān*, 20/195.

⁴⁶ Manuscripts of al-Ṭabarī often include “Mujāhid” instead of “Mujālid”, an obvious copyist error, since Mujālid bin Saʿīd is the teacher of Yahyā bin Saʿīd al-Umawī and ʿĪsā bin Yūnus.

⁴⁷ Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahḍīb al-Tahḍīb*, 4/24-25.

⁴⁸ Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 229.

⁴⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 11/636-637.

⁵⁰ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaʿ*, 6/138.

⁵¹ Ibn Sallām, *Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, p. 202.

⁵² Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 29.

⁵³ Abū Yazīd has been declared to be reliable according to al-ʿIjlī, *al-Thiqāt*, p. 515; and Ibn Ḥibbān, *al-Thiqāt*, 3/165; however, they are generally seen as lenient in strengthening narrators.

have occurred here would be a misattribution to a source. Abū Yazīd is not a major narrator of *ḥadīth*; so it would be strange if he were the sole narrator of this report from a major companion. However, his attribution is to Umm Ayyūb, who only narrates three narrations.⁵⁴ None of these reports are controversial or conflict with established narrations. If Abū Yazīd's intention was to forge a *ḥadīth* and establish its validity, he would have attributed it to someone with more fame and weight in the early Muslim community. The fact of the matter is that the report doesn't need to be corroborated by other narrators from Umm Ayyūb, nor does she need to be considered to be a common link for a report to be correctly attributed to her.

Similar concepts to those mentioned above apply to all narrations when studying them. *Ḥadīth* scholars, upon examining a chain and after determining the reliability of narrators, factor in the following considerations:

- Was the teacher a prominent narrator or a minor one?
- Was the student a prominent narrator or a minor one?
- Was the student close to the teacher?
- Is it likely that the student was the only person to have heard this report from his teacher?

Generally, scholars of *ḥadīth* are more lenient with the narrations of major narrators. Take for example the narration of al-Zuhrī from 'Urwah. Even though 'Urwah is a prominent narrator himself, al-Zuhrī is regarded to be more reliable in narrating the reports of 'Urwah than his own son Hishām bin 'Urwah.⁵⁵ The same could be said about other famous chains of transmission, like Mālik from Nāfi' or Sa'īd bin al-Musayyib from Abū Hurayra. However, the same cannot be said when a small narrator is the only person to narrate a *ḥadīth* from a major narrator. A scholar of *ḥadīth* would ask, "Where are all the other students of Mālik? Why didn't they narrate this report as well?" Based on this, as well as other factors, a narrator's status may be downgraded in the eyes of a scholar of *ḥadīth*.

The task of determining the status of these narrators, while factoring into consideration their isolated reports, was already completed by the fifth century after the *hijra*. In comparison, primitive criticisms of some Orientalists, who dismiss reports without an early common link and without taking into account the factors above, are reinventing wooden wheels being while under the illusion that they know better.

To conclude, narrations like the report of Umm Ayyūb should not be dismissed due to a minor weakness, since the report is already established, let alone authentic narrations with limited or isolated strands.

⁵⁴ Ibn Ḥazm, *Asmā' al-Ṣaḥāba al-Ruwāt*, p. 287.

⁵⁵ Ibn Ma'in, *Al-Tārīkh li-Yaḥyā bin Ma'in*, 1/213.

The Motivation behind the Fabrication

The variant readings were lacking “official validation” and “legitimacy” according to Nasser, and thus, the *ḥadīth* of the seven modes was required.⁵⁶ The Sunnī position is that the reports are *mutawātir* from the Prophet (peace be upon him), while Nasser brushes off these reports as forgeries that were concocted to validate the variants. Questions that come to mind include: Why should these variants receive validation in the first place if they were considered to be mistakes? Why would someone who holds the Qur’ān as the sacred verbatim word of God legitimize mistakes?

In that line of thinking, the Shī’a⁵⁷ have attributed to Muḥammad al-Bāqir that he said, “The Qur’ān is one and revealed from the One, but the differences are from the narrators.” Similarly, they attribute to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq that he said in response to the *ḥadīth* of the seven modes, “The enemies of Allāh lie; it is but one mode, from the One.”⁵⁸

On the other hand, Sunnī scholars did not make such statements, nor did they weaken or attempt to neutralize the *ḥadīth al-aḥruf al-sab‘a* with reports that conflicted with it, similar to the Shī‘ī reports above. The reason for that is because the legitimacy of the seven modes was established from the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Due to this conviction, the classical *ḥadīth* scholars like al-Qāsim bin Sallām,⁵⁹ al-Bukhārī,⁶⁰ Muslim,⁶¹ al-Tirmidī,⁶² Ibn Ḥibbān,⁶³ and al-Ḥākim,⁶⁴ graded the narration as authentic. We also can’t find any classical scholars rejecting the tradition as a false one, let alone making proclamations in condemnation of the concept of variant recitations. This is especially significant when combined with the fact that classical scholars took part in rejecting specific variants as mistakes, which is evidence of their vigilance when it came to verifying recitations.

Furthermore, the existence of variants in any text, from scripture to works of fiction, is often due to human error. The default assumption of classical scholars should be just that, which is that the variants are the product of human error. However, they chose to go against the natural cause for variants and adopted the seven modes as legitimate. This would only occur with the availability of overwhelming evidence in favor of this view.

⁵⁶ Nasser, *Transmission*, pp. 33-34.

⁵⁷ Early Shī’a that rejected the seven modes were only able to do so since the Shī‘ī corpus is largely isolated from the Sunni one with their own *ḥadīth* compilations. Due to this, the *ḥadīth* of seven modes was not adopted by classical Shī’a. Some modern Shī‘ī scholars, like the late Abdul Hādī al-Faḍlī, are exceptions that did accept the existence of seven modes. See *al-Qirā’āt al-Qur’āniyya*, pp. 91-92.

⁵⁸ Al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl Al-Kāfī*, 2/348-349.

⁵⁹ Ibn Sallām, *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān*, p. 203.

⁶⁰ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, p. 895.

⁶¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, pp. 371-373.

⁶² Al-Tirmidī, *Al-Jāmi‘ al-Kabīr*, p. 873.

⁶³ Ibn Ḥibbān, *Al-Iḥsān fī Taqrīb Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, p. 308.

⁶⁴ Al-Ḥākim, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, 2/771.

A Final Thought

A century ago, despite living at a time when the publication of multitudes of classical manuscripts still did not take place, the German Orientalist Nöldeke was nevertheless still reasonable enough to conclude that the *ḥadīth* of the seven modes originated from the Prophet (peace be upon him). If Nasser produced his theory a century ago, it would have at least been open for discussion. Today, however, we have recovered classical texts that were previously considered to be lost in the clutches of time. These texts include hundreds of chains of narrations, from Madinah, Makkah, Kufa, and Basra. To dismiss every chain as a fabrication is to dismiss every historical account in general, since mass-transmitted reports, outside Islamic literature, are a rarity. According to Nasser, Muslims that view the Qur'ān as a sacred text, realized the existence of an abundance of errors, and legitimized these “errors” through the mass-transmission of *ḥadīth* that validated a set amount of variants. This is an irrational and bizarre theory to say the least.

Unfortunately, the main issue with Nasser is the inconsistent standards that he employs when dealing with narrations that conflict with his theories, since he seemingly has no qualms about relying on solitary and weak reports that support his stances.

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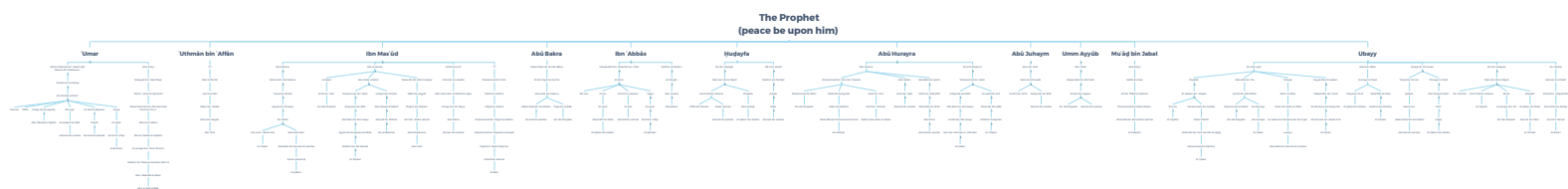


Figure 1

The Prophet
(peace be upon him)

Ubayy

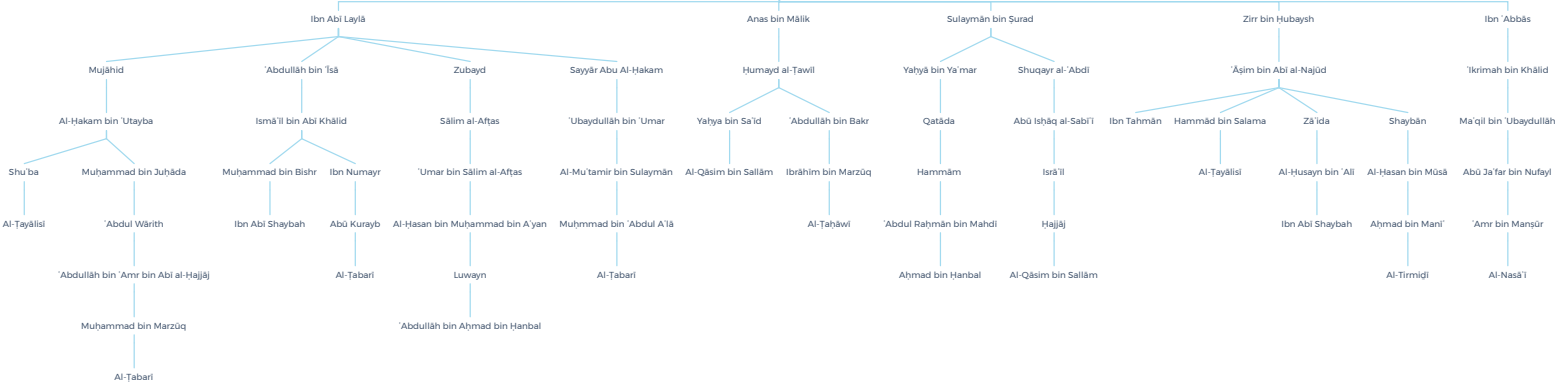


Figure 2

The Prophet (peace be upon him)

Ibn Mas'ūd

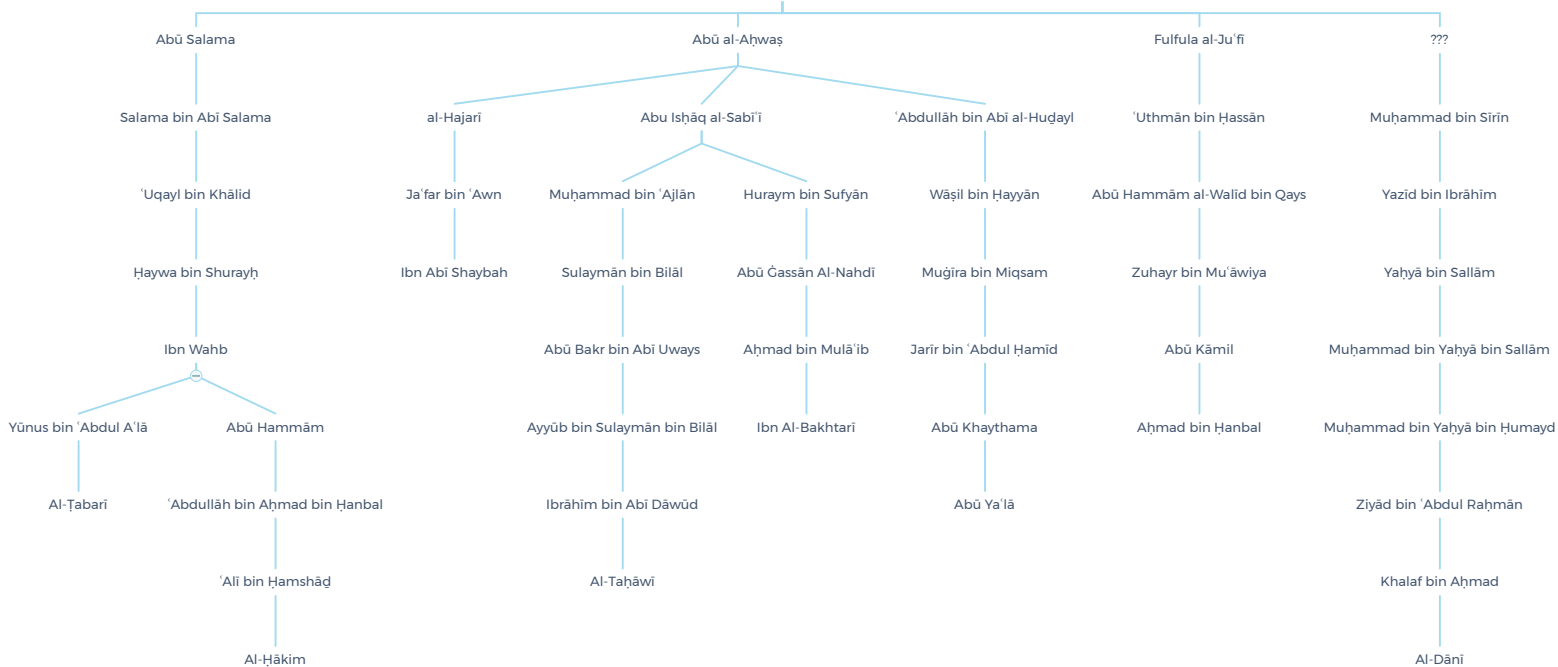


Figure 3

The Prophet (peace be upon him)

Abū Hurayra

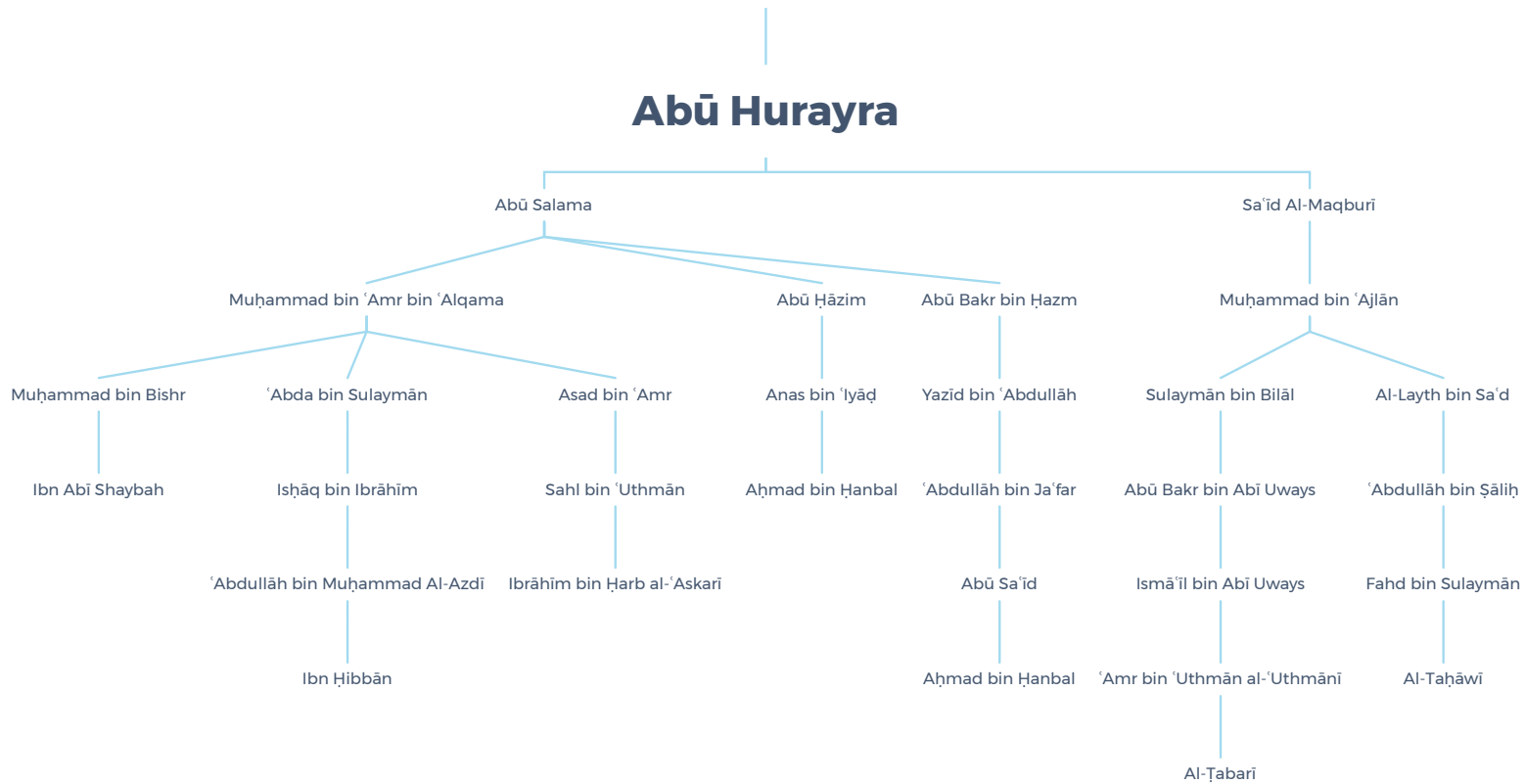


Figure 4

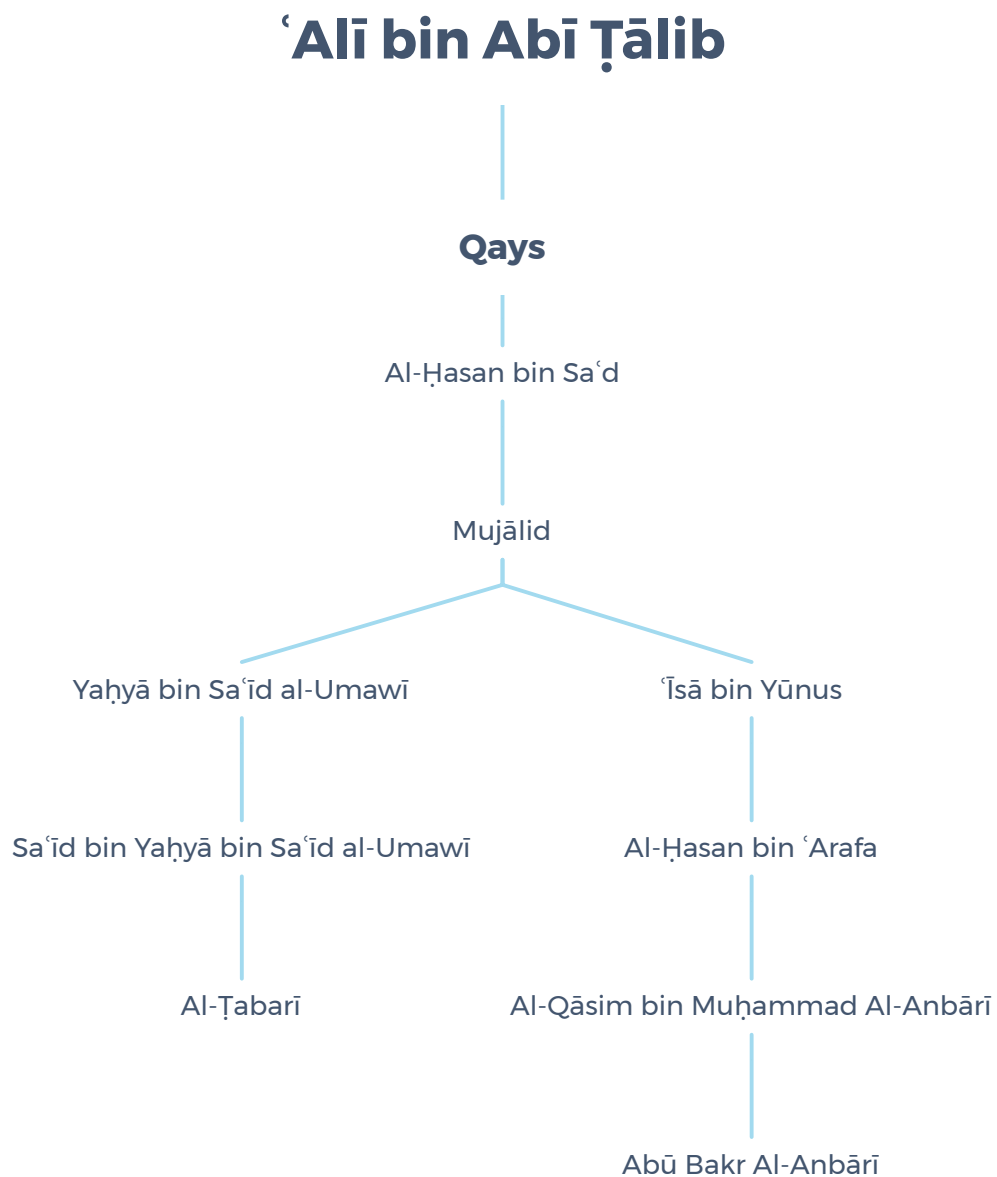


Figure 5